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MADAME D'ARBLAY

BY GAMALIEL BRADFORD

FRANCES BURNEY (Madame D'Arblay) wrote a diary or diary-like letters almost from the cradle to the grave. For reasons which will appear later we do not know so much about her intimate self as might be expected from such minuteness of record; but her external life, the places she dwelt in, the people she saw, the things she did, are brought before us with a full detail which is rare in the biography of women and even of men.

She was as little of a Bohemian in soul as any one who ever lived. Yet her career had something of the nomadic, kaleidoscopic character which we are apt to call Bohemian. She met all sorts of people and portrayed all sorts, from the top of society to the bottom. And through this infinite diversity of spiritual contact she carried an eager eye, an untiring pen, and a singularly amiable disposition.

Her father, Dr. Charles Burney, the musician and historian of music, had an excellent stock of what is nowadays called temperament. He was witty, gay, and charming. Everybody went to his house and he to everybody's. Thus Fanny in her youth (she was born in 1752) had the opportunity of seeing many of the distinguished men and women of eighteenth-century London: Johnson and Goldsmith, Sir Joshua Reynolds, Händel, Garrick, and Sheridan, Bruce the traveler, actors, singers, beaux, divines, ladies with blue stockings, and with stockings of other colors. It was a gay and variegated world for a quick-eyed girl to make merry in. She made merry in it, she studied it, and, as a certain literary gift was born in her, she profited.

Then, when she was twenty-five, she wrote and published anonymously an epistolary novel called *Evelina*. Even to-day, though its charm is of a peculiarly perishable order, the book may be read with pleasure and some laughter. But its freshness, its ease, and its rollicking spirits must have com-

mended it highly to an age whose own speech and manners were reflected in it. Fanny had first the delicious pleasure of hearing genuine praise from those who had no idea of her authorship. And when the authorship was confessed—as who, under such circumstances, would have concealed it?—the praise became universal, more high-pitched still, and perhaps no less delicious. The book was read everywhere, commended everywhere. Fanny's father, whom she adored, was bewitched with it. No less so was that odd personage, Samuel Crisp, almost equally adored, who, like some others, having made a notable failure in literature himself, felt especially qualified to advise those who had succeeded.

In the houses where Fanny had before been a minor personage, a petted child, watching great doings and bewigged celebrities with wide-eyed curiosity from quiet corners, she now appeared as a celebrity herself, not bewigged, but with the wigs bowing down to her. Titles of honor begged for an introduction, and titles of learning. She was pointed out in the streets and in the theaters. Her characters were cited, her wit quoted, her sentiments applied by daily personages to daily life. London was all the English world then, and a book read by ten thousand people in London had a sort of personal success which no book could have anywhere to-day.

Best of all, Fanny was praised by those whose praise she knew to be really worth having. Sir Joshua said he would give fifty pounds to know the author of *Evelina*. Burke sat up all night to finish it. Sheridan and Murphy entreated her to write a comedy and Garrick agreed to take it before a word was put on paper. To a girl of twenty-five, up to that day merely one of the babes and sucklings, all this must have seemed like a golden dream.

But the best was Johnson. Fanny was brought into intimate contact with him in Mrs. Thrale's hospitable house at Streatham. Something of the Doctor's enthusiasm must doubtless be laid to the influence of grace, beauty, and feminine charm on that ogreish and susceptible heart. But, whatever the cause, he set no bounds to an outcry of admiration sufficient to turn the head of an older and sedater woman. Nothing like *Evelina*, he said, had appeared for years. And the literary praise was mingled with expressions of personal affection. "Afterwards, grasping my hand with the most affectionate warmth, he said: 'I wish you success! I wish you well! my dear little Burney!'"

In such a highly flavored atmosphere did the girl live until the publication of her second novel, *Cecilia*, in 1782.

Then there came an extraordinary change. Mrs. Thrale married the Italian musician, Piozzi, and the Streatham circle was broken up. Miss Burney's greatest supporter, Johnson, died in 1784, and in the following year Fanny was transplanted, elevated or degraded, as you please, from the free, fascinating life of a popular author to be a personal attendant on the queen. Dr. Burney thought his daughter's future assured in the most promising fashion. She herself entered upon her new career with anxiety and regret and found nothing in it to contradict her unpleasant expectations. The queen and princesses were, indeed, kind to her; but their hangers-on were not, or not all of them. She had been born free, had grown up in freedom, had been accustomed to indulge her fancies, to have them indulged by others, limiting them only by love and the affectionate wish to comply with the fancies of those dear to her. Now she was cramped in every movement; what was far worse, in every thought. To do servant's work for a servant's stipend was hateful. To run at bell-call for an idle bidding was more hateful. But these were nothing compared to having no home, no time, no life, of one's own. To move by the clock, some one else's clock, to be thrown into any quarters that could be spared from the needs of those higher, to dress and undress at stated times in stated fashions, to listen to the dullness of the great and the impudence of the little, to be never, never Dr. Burney's daughter, but always the handmaid of the queen—what a change from the caresses of Johnson and the compliments of Burke! Even pastimes not unwelcome in themselves become so in such surroundings. What a wail does she utter over the daily infliction of piquet with the tyrannous Mrs. Schwellenberg: "O piquet—life hardly hangs on earth during its compulsion, in these months succeeding months, and years creeping, crawling after years."

And then another change, quite as violent as the preceding. Miss Burney's health fails under the strain, she leaves the court, is thrown among a group of French *émigrés*, meets General D'Arblay, marries him, and settles down in a quiet country cottage, with a bit of an income and a garden full of cabbages. No Burkes nor Johnsons here, no kings or queens or saucy gentlemen in waiting; just quiet. One would think she would miss it all, even what was hateful. Charles Lamb

sighed to be rid of his India House slavery, and when he was rid of it, could not tell what to do with his freedom. So it is apt to be with all of us. But Madame D'Arblay apparently knew when she was well off. She adored her husband. She was absorbed in her son. She wrote another novel, *Camilla*, less readable than the others, but well paid for. She entertained with perfect simplicity any friend who could come to her. She had but one dread—lest some call of military or political duty in France might draw away her husband and break up her Paradise. “Ah, if peace would come without, what could equal my peace within!”

The call of duty did come. Her husband went and she followed him, into other scenes, still totally different from what had gone before. She saw the France of the first Napoleon and Napoleon himself. She saw the restoration of the Bourbons. She was hurried along in the mad bustle of the flight from Paris. She waited in Brussels through the suspense of Waterloo. With husband and son, and alone, she had adventures and perils by land and sea. Surely she had need of a good stock of peace within, for peace without seemed very far away.

But the last act passed quietly at home in England. She was not fêted or flattered any more, as she had been. Yet enough of old glory clung about her to bring her a large price for one more very indifferent novel, *The Wanderer*. Her husband died, her son died. Not much was left to her but memories, and these, when she was nearly eighty, she wove into a life of her father, which Macaulay condemned, but which has at least the merit of being sweet and sunshiny. To recall such a golden past, such a tangled web of fortune, at eighty, without a word of bitterness for the present, shows a heart worth loving, worth studying. Let us study Madame D'Arblay's.

She will not help us so much as we could wish. “Poor Fanny's face tells what she thinks, whether she will or no,” said Dr. Burney. Her face might. Her diary does not. To be sure, she herself asserts repeatedly that she writes nothing but the truth. “How truly does this Journal contain my real, undisguised thoughts; . . . its truth and simplicity are its sole recommendation.” No doubt she believed so. No doubt she aimed to be absolutely veracious. No doubt she avoids false statements and perversion of fact. Her diary may be true, but it is not genuine. It is literary, artificial,

in every line of it. She sees herself exactly as a man—or woman—sees himself in a mirror: the very nature of the observation involves unconscious and instinctive posing.

Macaulay, in his rhetorical fashion, draws a violent distinction between Madame D'Arblay's memoirs of her father and her diary. The diary, he says, is fresh and natural, the memoirs tricked up with all the artifice of a perfumer's shop. Neither is fresh and natural. The memoirs are overloaded with Johnsonian ornament; but the simpler style of the diary is not one bit more spontaneous or more genuine. It was impossible for the woman to look at herself in any but a literary point of view.

Take, for instance, the address to *Nobody*, with which the diary opens. It sets the note at once. There is not the slightest suggestion of a sincere, direct effort to record the experiences of a soul; merely an airy, literary coquetting with somebody, everybody, under the Nobody mask.

A single breath of fresh air is enough to blast the artificiality of the whole thing. Turn from a page of the diary to any letter of Mrs. Piozzi—some of them are given in the diary itself. A coarse woman, a passionate woman, a jealous woman—but, oh, so genuine in every word. Her loud veracity sweeps through Fanny's dainty nothings like a salt-sea breeze. And do not misunderstand the distinction. Fanny could not have told a lie to save her life. Mrs. Piozzi probably tossed them about like cherries or bonbons. But Mrs. Piozzi, laughing or lying, was always herself, without thinking about herself. Fanny was always thinking—unconsciously, if one may say so—of how she would appear to somebody else.

Thus I cannot agree with Mr. Dobson that her diary is to be classed with the great diaries. A page of Pepys is enough to put her out of the count. She may be more decorous, more varied, even more entertaining. As a portrayer of her own soul or of the souls of others, between her and Pepys there is no comparison.

So, I repeat, our diarist helps us less than she ought. Yet even she cannot write two thousand pages, nominally about herself, without telling something. The very fact of such literary self-consciousness is of deep human interest. It is to be noted, also, that she does not conceal herself from any instinct of reserve. She is willing to drop pose and tell all, if she could; but she cannot. Such thoughtless self-con-

fession as Pepys's would have been impossible to her. I do not think that once, in all her volumes, does she show herself in an unfavorable light.

But we can detect what she does not show. We can read much, much that she did not mean us to read. And lights are thrown on her by others as well as by herself.

To begin with, how did she bear glory? For a girl of twenty-five to be thrown into such a blaze of it was something of an ordeal. She herself disclaims any excessive ambition. She could almost wish the triumph might "happen to some other person who had more ambition, whose hopes were sanguine, who could less have borne to be buried in the oblivion which I even sought." She records all the fine things that are said of her, the surmises of eager curiosity, the ardent outbursts of family affection, the really tumultuous enthusiasm of ripened critical judgment. But she is rather awed than inflated by it; at least, so she says. "I believe half the flattery I have had would have made me madly merry; but *all* only serves to depress me by the fullness of heart it occasions." "Steeped as she was in egotism," is the phrase used of her by Hayward, the biographer of Mrs. Piozzi. If she was so steeped, it certainly did not appear in outward obtrusiveness, pretense, or self-assertion. She repeatedly complains of her own shyness; and others, who knew her in very various surroundings, bear witness to it as strongly. "She was silent, backward, and timid, even to sheepishness," writes her father. "Dr. Burney and his daughter, the author of *Evelina* and *Cecilia*, . . . I always thought rather avoided than solicited notice," says Wraxall. And Walpole, assuredly never inclined to minimize defects, speaks with an enthusiasm which is absolutely conclusive. Miss Burney "is half-and-half sense and modesty, which possess her so entirely, that not a cranny is left for pretense or affectation."

No. The author of *Evelina* may, must, have reveled in the praise which was showered upon her to the point of intoxication. But she kept her head, and few men or women ever lived who were less spoiled by flattery than she.

Indeed, her extreme shyness probably prevented her being brilliantly successful in general society. She herself disposes summarily of her qualifications in that regard. A hostess, she says, should provide for the intellectual as well as the material wants of her guests. "To take care of both,

as every mistress of a table ought to do, requires practice as well as spirits, and ease as well as exertion. Of these four requisites I possess not one."

This is the sort of thing one prefers saying oneself to having others say it. There can be no doubt that Miss Burney had tact, grace, charm, and, above all, that faculty of taking command of and saving a difficult situation which is one of the most essential of social requisites. There is character in the pretty little anecdote of her childhood. She and her playmates had soaked and ruined a crusty neighbor's wig. He scolded. For a while Fanny—ten years old—listened with remorse and patience. Then she walked up to him and said: "What signifies talking so much about an accident? The wig is wet, to be sure; and the wig was a good wig, to be sure; but 'tis of no use to speak of it any more, because what's done can't be undone."

Still, she was doubtless at her best with one or two friends, where she felt at her ease. She loved society and conversation, but it was of the intimate, fireside order. How fine is her remark in this connection: "I determined, however, to avoid all tête-à-têtes with him whatsoever, as much as was in my power. How very few people are fit for them, nobody living in trios and quartettos can imagine!" She studied her interlocutors and adapted herself to them. "As I soon found by the looks and expressions of this young lady, that she was of a peculiar cast, I left all choice of subjects to herself, determined quietly to follow as she led." She had also that charming gift for intimate society, the power, or rather, the instinctive quality, of drawing confidences. Young and old, men and women, told her their hopes, their sorrows, their aspirations, and their difficulties. This, I think, does not commonly happen to persons steeped in egotism.

As it is delightful to turn from one trait in a character to another that seems quite incompatible with it, we must not assume that, because Miss Burney was shy and retiring, therefore she wanted spirits and gaiety. On the contrary, she assures us, and the diary and her other writings and her friends confirm it, that in good company she could carry laughter and hilarity to the pitch of riot. What a delicious picture does Crisp paint of her in childhood, dancing "Nancy Dawson on the grass-plot, with your cap on the ground, and your long hair streaming down your back, one

shoe off, and throwing about your head like a mad thing." She was always ready to dance Nancy Dawson, and eager in sympathy when others danced. In the lively parts of *Evelina* there is a Bacchic boisterousness almost Rabelaisian, and again and again throughout the diary scenes of pure, wild fun diversify the literary gravity of Streatham and the dull decorum of the court of George the Third.

But if Miss Burney could mock her friends she could also love them, and to study her friendships is to study the woman herself. Mrs. Thrale-Piozzi does, indeed, write of her young protégée in rather harsh terms. Like all the rest of the Streatham world, Fanny was bitterly opposed to the Piozzi marriage, and her attitude provoked her former hostess to indignant criticism. Even in the earlier days of ardent affection Mrs. Thrale notes some flaws in the relationship. Fanny was independent. Mrs. Thrale was patronizing. Fanny accepted favors a little as her due. Mrs. Thrale showered them, but wished them recognized. "Fanny Burney has kept her room here in my house seven days, with a fever or something that she calls a fever; I gave her every medicine and every slop with my own hand; took away her dirty cups, spoons, etc.; moved her tables; in short, was doctor, nurse, and maid—for I did not like the servants should have additional trouble, lest they should hate her for it. And now, with the true gratitude of a wit, she tells me that the world thinks the better of me for my civility to her. It does? does it?"

Can you not understand how Fanny felt? And how Mrs. Thrale felt? And that nevertheless they loved each other, as Mrs. Thrale indeed eagerly admits?

Then came the Piozzi trouble and the lady speaks harshly of "the treacherous Burneys." Yet I do not think Fanny deserved it. She loved Dr. Johnson and she loved Mrs. Thrale. Between them her course was difficult. Also, she was undeniably conventional by nature and Mrs. Thrale's irregularities shocked her. Yet she did the best she could.

"Treacherous," said Mrs. Thrale. "True as gold," said Queen Charlotte. The latter is much nearer the facts. Affection, loyal, devoted affection was the root of Miss Burney's existence. She quotes Dr. Johnson's saying to her, "Cling to those who cling to you," and I am sure she was ready to carry it the one step farther which real loyalty requires. Her old friends stuck by her and she by them.

She defends them when they need it, even when they hardly deserve it. "All else but kindness and society has to me so always been nothing."

Especially charming is her devotion to her family. The memoirs of her father are three volumes of long laudation. Almost equal is her affection for that singular figure, her other father, Samuel Crisp. Her sisters, Susan especially, are loved and praised with similar ecstasy, and when her husband appears, her letters to him and about him are as rapturous as was to be expected. One strange exception to these family ardors stands out by its oddity. Madame D'Arblay's only son is, in youth, not what she would wish him to be—not dissipated, not vicious, but unsocial, unconventional—and she analyzes him to his father with a critical coldness which, in her, is startling. "When he is wholly at his ease, as he is at present . . . he is uncouth, negligent, and absent. . . . He exults rather than blushes in considering himself ignorant of everything that belongs to common life, and of everything that is deemed useful. . . . Sometimes he wishes for wealth, but it is only that he might be supine. . . . Yet, while thus open to every dupery, and professedly without any sense of order, he is so fearful of ridicule that a smile from his wife at any absurdity would fill him with the most gloomy indignation. It does so now from his mother." And thus we get sudden glimpses into deep gulfs of human nature where it is hardly meant we should.

It seems almost an irony that a person of Miss Burney's social and conventional temper should have been forced into the excess of social convention—a court. She knew what was before her and hated it; for we like to indulge our failings in our own way. All the more, therefore, is one struck with the admirable qualities which such a trying experience calls out in her. To begin with, she maintains her dignity. Sensitive, shy, and timid as she was, it might be supposed that all court creatures would walk over her, from the king to the lowest lackey, that in the busy struggle to climb she would be made a ladder rung for every coarse or careless foot. No, it is clear she was not. She had no false pretensions, no whimsical assertion of pride in the wrong place. But she would not be imposed upon. How fine and straightforward is her statement of principle in the matter: "To submit to ill-humor rather

than argue and dispute I think an exercise of patience, and I encourage myself all I can to practise it; but to accept even a shadow of an obligation upon such terms I should think mean and unworthy; and therefore I mean always, in a Court as I would elsewhere, to be open and fearless in declining such subjection."

Even finer is the force of character with which she resists depression and brooding over being torn from her friends and cut off from all her favorite pursuits. "Now, therefore, I took shame to myself and resolved to be happy." Happy she could not be, but such a resolution alters life, nevertheless; and shows an immense fund of character in the resolver. Similar resources she had shown before when literary failure came to her as well as success. Accept the inevitable, resolutely control all thought of what cannot be helped, say nothing about it, and try something else. In short, she had a rich supply of that useful article, common sense. It is to be noted, also, that the heroines of her novels have it, for all their wild adventures.

With these various opportunities of human contact and with this natural shrewdness, Madame D'Arblay's diary should have been a mine of varied and powerful observation of life. It is not. She presents us with a vast collection of figures, vividly contrasted and distinguished in external details and little personal peculiarities; but rarely, if ever, does she get down to essentials, to a real grip on the deeper springs and motives of character. This is in large part due to the eternal literary prepossession which I have already pointed out. You feel that the painter is much more interested in making an effective picture than a genuine likeness. But Miss Burney's deficiencies as a psychologist go deeper than this technical artificiality and are bound up with one of the greatest charms of her personal temperament. For an exact observer of character she is altogether too amiable. I do not at all assert that a good student of men must hate them. Far from it.

There is a soul of goodness in things evil,
Would we observingly distill it out

is an excellent warning for the psychologist. But Miss Burney is really too full of the milk of human kindness. It oozes from every pore. She "tempers her satire with meekness," said Mrs. Thrale. She does indeed. Occasion-

ally, in a very elaborate portrait, like that of her fellow courtier, "Mr. Turbulent," she makes what the French call a "*charge*"; but even these are the rallying of utter good-nature, not the bitter caricatures of the born satirist. When, by rare chance, she does bring herself to a bitter touch, she usually atones for it by the observing distillation of a soul of goodness, which transfers the subject to the sheep category at once.

It is thus that her really vast gallery of portraiture is cruelly disappointing. Turn from her to Saint-Simon or Lord Hervey, turn even to the milder Greville or Madame de Rémusat, and you will feel the difference. George the Third was not Louis the Fourteenth, nor Queen Charlotte, Queen Caroline. But George and his wife were hardly the beatific spirits that appear in this diary. Miss Burney cannot say enough about her dear queen, her good queen, her saintly queen. Mrs. Thrale remarks: "The Queen's approaching death gives no concern but to the tradesmen, who want to sell their pinks and yellows, I suppose." And this is refreshing after so much distillation of soul perfumery.

In short, though she was far from a fool, Miss Burney's views of humanity do more credit to her heart than to her head. If the paradox is permissible, she was exceedingly intelligent, but not very richly endowed with intelligence—that is, she was quick to perceive and reason in detail, but she had no turn for abstract thinking. The "puppy-men" at Bath complained to Mrs. Thrale that her young protégée had "such a drooping air and such a timid intelligence." This was greatly to the credit of the puppy-men's discernment. Timid intellectually—not morally—Miss Burney certainly was. Such learning as she had she carefully disguised, and in this, no doubt, she had as fellows other eighteenth-century women much bigger than she. But when she gets hold of an attractive book she waits to read it in company. "Anything highly beautiful I have almost an aversion of reading alone." Here I think we have a mark of social instincts altogether outbalancing the intellectual.

As to religious opinions we have no right to criticize Miss Burney's reserve, because she tells us that it is of set purpose. At the same time it is noticeable how ready she is to look up to somebody else for her thinking. Her father, Crisp, Dr. Johnson, Mr. Locke, her husband, each in turn is an idol, a mainstay for the timid intelligence to cling to.

And as her intelligence was perhaps not Herculean, so I question whether her emotional life, just and tender and true as it unquestionably was, had anything volcanic in it. She had certainly admirable control of her feelings; but in these cases we are never quite sure whether the force controlling is strong or the force controlled weak. Her love for her husband was rapturous—in words. Words were her stock in trade. It was also, no doubt, capable of supreme sacrifice; for her conscience was high and pure. Still, that “drooping air and timid intelligence” haunt me. She seems to approach all life, from God to her baby, with a delicious spiritual awe; so different from Miss Austen, who walks right up and lifts the veil of awe from everything. Miss Burney, indeed, stands as much in awe of herself as of everything else; and hence it is that, writing thousands of words about herself, she tells us comparatively little.

One thing is certain, she was a writer from her childhood to her death. Her own experiences and all others were “copy,” first and foremost. “I thought the lines worth preserving; so flew out of the room to write this.” She was always flying out of life to preserve it—in syrup. The minute detail with which she writes down—or invents—all the conversations of her first love affair is extraordinary enough. Still, as she had no feeling in the matter herself, it was less wonderful that she could describe—not analyze—the young man’s. But she did love her father. She did love her husband. That she could go from their death-beds and write down last words and dying wishes, all the hopes and fears of those supreme moments, with cool, artistic finish and posterity in her eye, is a fine instance of the scribbling mania.

It is, therefore, as an authoress that we must chiefly think of her. It is as the fêted, flattered, worshiped creatress of *Evelina* that her girlish figure gets its finest piquancy; and she herself, in old age, must have gone back again and again, through all the varied agitations of fifty years, to that notable evening when Johnson and Burke vied with each other in enthusiastic praise of her book, and as she left them, intoxicated with glory, Burke quietly said to her, “Miss Burney, die to-night.”

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